

Getting a leg up from far down

3 programs seek to put low-wage workers on the first rung of careers in biotechnology, construction and health care

By Jamie Smith Hopkins
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November 2, 2005

Donald W. Thompson, 30, works at a warehouse for \$9.60 an hour, about the best he could hope to earn without a high-school diploma. But he has three young children, and the money isn't enough.

"I want to better myself, you know?" said Thompson, who lives in East Baltimore. "For my family, because we can't live how I grew up."

One of the city's most intractable dichotomies is the fact that the average Baltimore employer pays wages that are among the highest in the state, yet city residents earn salaries that are among the lowest. Too frequently, they can't land the good jobs.

Now local nonprofits are designing programs to bridge that gap.

Foundations and job-help providers are launching three training programs early next year to help city residents break into fields that pay well and need workers: construction, biotechnology and health care.

The initiatives are meant to prepare participants for additional education - an apprenticeship in a construction trade, for instance. All three are free. And the construction program will take residents who have the hardest time getting jobs: High-school dropouts and former offenders.

"I think it could make a huge difference for people in Baltimore," said Jason Perkins-Cohen, executive director of the nonprofit Job Opportunities Task Force, which is overseeing the East Baltimore Pre-Apprenticeship Training Program, the construction initiative. "It's forming a pipeline to help lower-skill people to get into these higher-wage jobs."

Half the households in the city earned less than \$35,000 last year, compared with a median of \$61,000 statewide, according to state planning estimates.

Traditional job-skills programs are geared to workers, helping them to overcome barriers such as illiteracy and pointing them to employment opportunities.

But now some providers - including those involved in the new Baltimore programs - are considering the needs of employers as well. They're focusing on industries with shortages and asking for company input. They're hoping to get better results, especially for residents stuck in dead-end jobs.

The Baltimore metropolitan chapter of the Associated Builders and Contractors, a trade group of nonunion contractors, will run the pre-apprenticeship training with advice from a steering committee of employers.

"Right now, finding skilled people is hands-down the biggest issue in construction by far," said chapter president Mike Henderson, whose group offers apprenticeship classes in Baltimore County and hopes to expand that into the city in about a year. "If you're a skilled trades person ... you will be in demand."

Jerry Rubin, a vice president at Jobs for the Future, a Boston research, policy and technical assistance group, calls this "the next wave" of work force development and said Baltimore is among a handful of cities trying it.

"As far as I'm concerned, there is no point ... training people where there is not an employer or a group of employers directly involved," Rubin said. Otherwise, "you're really misleading people. You're training people for something that may or may not exist."

The jobs targeted in Baltimore exist, and their pay is a big step up from minimum wage.

Laboratory associates typically earn about \$12 an hour to start and can reach \$19 an hour in four years, said the BioTechnical Institute of Maryland Inc. The Baltimore nonprofit will launch a three-month basic skills initiative called BioStart in January to prepare residents for its three-month laboratory associates program.

The Baltimore Alliance for Careers in Healthcare Inc., a consortium of foundations, medical providers and institutions, will offer basic-skills training next year to help people qualify for certification programs that lead to jobs such as radiological technician, which pays \$18 to \$28 an hour.

Average wages for plumbers, carpenters and electricians who have finished apprenticeships are \$20 to \$25 an hour - more than \$40,000 a year, not counting overtime - and employees working through the four-year apprenticeship process see their pay rise steadily toward that mark.

"I've never made that much before," said East Baltimore resident Jacqueline R. Turner, 38, who is hoping to become an electrician.

Turner has struggled in "survival jobs" such as painting because she has multiple felony charges on her record. Training looks to her like a chance to turn her life around. "This is important - I'm tired of being on the bottom."

Victor K. Carter, who also wants to be an electrician, is determined to make it into the first pre-apprenticeship class in January so he can pull himself out of an \$8.50-an-hour job as a builder of burial vaults. His morning commute from Northeast Baltimore to North Laurel takes him about 2 1/2 hours by subway and bus.

"It's very, very difficult to find a good-paying job in the Baltimore area because so many people are applying for those jobs, and a lot of people don't have the educational background," said Carter, 43. "A lot of young black people - even older black people - get discouraged at the continued disappointments."

Thompson, the warehouse worker, is thinking about carpentry. He heard about the training through Goodwill Industries of the Chesapeake Inc., one of the groups involved in the effort.

"You have the opportunity to learn something about something that will pay more, then don't hesitate," said Thompson, who is working to obtain a high school-equivalency diploma.

Employers dealing with shortages see training as the solution.

"People in the community are not coming forth for these jobs, so we need to figure out how to do it ourselves," said Joan Tisdale, director of education and development at St. Agnes Hospital.

"I've seen a lot of activity lately on work force development by hospitals, whereas we used to not pay attention to it so much," she said.

Dr. M. Victor Lemas, who runs a Johns Hopkins School of Medicine laboratory, said the people trained by the BioTechnical Institute are more likely to stay on the job than college graduates, who see laboratory associate as a bridge to graduate school or a better-paying position. He thinks training programs will grow in importance as Baltimore's two new biotech parks create jobs.

"You really do have people who can walk right into the laboratory ... because they were specifically focusing on those technical skills," he said.

Participants in the pre-apprenticeship construction program will take classes two nights a week for three months to brush up on the math they'll need to qualify for an apprenticeship in the plumbing, carpentry and electrician trades and will also learn how to work as semi-skilled helpers on construction sites.

The program - which has \$500,000 in funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Open Society Institute - will try to place participants in construction jobs early on.

"Oftentimes people get stuck in training programs that don't connect to a job, and I think what we've learned is, you learn about work through work," said Bob Giloth of the Casey Foundation.

The numbers are relatively small to start. The construction, health care and biotech programs together are expected to reach as many as 250 people next year.

By comparison, in a typical year city hospitals need to fill 100 to 150 open jobs in seven allied-health categories alone.

Washington Village resident Denmark Taylor, 28, wants to be one of 250 trainees. He's had a series of low-paying jobs and arrests for selling drugs, and he thinks career education is the way out.

"I'm doing it for my daughter," said Taylor, who has experience with rehabbing work. "Her mother wants to see improvement in me. ... I can't disagree."

New training programs

Here's a rundown on trio of free new programs:

- What is it: East Baltimore Pre-Apprenticeship Training Program.

Phone: 410-837-1800, ext. 176.

What it offers: Three months of basic training in carpentry, plumbing and electrical work. Trainees immediately can start as a semiskilled helper and can qualify for an apprenticeship. Starts in January.

Requirements: Sixth-grade skills in reading and math. Restricted to city residents, with a preference for people living in East Baltimore.

- What is it: BioStart. Phone: 410-752-4224.

What it offers: Three months of basic training in math, reading and laboratory skills to prepare trainees for the BioTechnical Institute of Maryland's laboratory associates program. Starts in January.

Requirements: High school diploma or GED; sixth- to eighth-grade skills in reading and math; good references; drug-free, with no recent criminal record; and residency in East Baltimore.

· What is it: Baltimore Alliance for Careers in Healthcare's bridge program. Phone: 410-379-6200, ext. 3381.

What it offers: 12 to 15 weeks of information about health jobs such as certified nursing assistant, and training to prepare trainees to enroll in the certification programs the jobs require. Starts in February.

Requirements: High school diploma or GED; eighth-grade reading and math skills; drug-free; and city residency.

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